THE STOICS

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La fortuna non esiste, esiste il tempo in cui il talento incontra l'opportunità.

(Seneca)

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Foreword

Wanting to fill the gaps in my education, I attempted to draw on some authoritative sources found in Professor Giuseppe Melli's text, Greek Philosophy from Epicurus to the Neoplatonists (Sanzoni Editore 1922). This brief essay is an arrangement, I hope faithful, of the text.

Apologies for any errors and inaccuracies, as well as for the brevity of the presentation of a topic that has engaged the greatest minds of all time.

(Google Translation)

STOICS

Contemporary and rival to the Epicurean school is that of the Stoics. The founder of the Stoic school was Zeno [1], son of Mnasius, born in Citium, on the island of Cyprus, a Greek city that had received Phoenician colonists.

Zeno must have had Oriental blood in his veins; with his black skin tone and slightly sloping neck, they called him the little Phoenician, *Poenulus* , as Cicero says. He probably lived from 334 to 262 BC, that is, 72 years old, although some have him die older, even over 90.

His father was a merchant, and he himself, according to tradition, had come to Athens for business, but having lost a cargo of purple in a shipwreck near Piraeus, he was left poor. So, while in Athens, he sat down one day in a bookseller's shop and, reading a volume of Socrates, written by Xenophon, ended by asking the bookseller where there were men like those mentioned in that book. "Here's one; follow him," the bookseller replied, pointing to the philosopher Crates of Thebes, who happened to be passing by. So Zeno enrolled in Crates's school and became a philosopher himself.

[1] Diogenes Laertius tells us that "Zeno was the son of Mneseus or Demeus, and was born in Citium, on Cyprus."

Alluding to his misfortune, which had been the origin or occasion of his good fortune, he later said: "I was sailing happily when I was shipwrecked."

These anecdotes must be taken for what they are worth. According to another, less romantic version, the young man, even while he was in his homeland, showed a certain inclination towards philosophy, and his father, returning from Athens, brought him the books of the Socratics. As he grew older, he went to Athens and met with Crates.

Crates was a philosopher of the Cynic school, and what was strong and austere, one might say Socratic, in the Cynic maxims, the love of virtue, the independence of the wise man from external goods, the frugality of life coupled with strength of mind, must have made a great impression on the serious mind of Zeno.

But there were also exaggerations: the contempt for propriety, that affectation and ostentation that characterized the Cynics, must have repelled him; and then even the contempt for study, the scientific sterility of school, must not have satisfied him in the long run.

He therefore sought more solid intellectual nourishment in the school of Megarian Stilpo [2], who combined a severe morality with

[2] Stilpo of Megara (Megara, 360 BC – c. 280 BC) was an ancient Greek philosopher, belonging to the minor Socratic school of Megara Nisaea in Attica.

more decent forms and, above all, a more subtle dialectic. And here is another anecdote, reported by Diogenes Laertius [3]: Crates was trying to hold Zeno by the pallium, so that he would not go to Stilpo. And Zeno said to him: *O Crates, philosophers must be seized or held by the ears: once you have persuaded them, then you can draw them to you. If you use force, the body will be with you, but the mind will be with Stilpo.*

But even the Megarians did not completely satisfy him; he also listened to Polemon [4]the Academician. He spent, they say, twenty years learning from others, without neglecting the books of his predecessors, especially Heraclitus.

Polemon told her that as a good merchant he took his goods from here and there, giving her a Phoenician dress.

Finally, after having passed from school to school, he founded one himself around 300 BC. He taught in a portico painted by Polygnotus [5]which was therefore called the *Stoa* (the gallery of paintings), once a meeting place for poets, and then deserted, also

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[3] Diogenes Laertius (3rd century) was an ancient Greek historian, whose work, *Lives of the Philosophers,* is a major source on the history of Greek philosophy.

[4] He was one of the most notable representatives of the Platonic school in the earliest phase of its evolution.

[5] Polygnotus of Thasos (5th century BC). The paintings in the Stoa of Poikile are attributed to him . Polygnotus used the four traditional colors (black, white, red, and yellow) for his works, and his palette can be considered similar to that used for the contemporary tombs of Tarquinia.

because terrible memories were associated with it: under the thirty tyrants 1400 citizens had been massacred there.

Zeno chose that place; and from it, from the Stoa, the name of the school he founded.

Zeno was highly esteemed and Antigonus Gonatas, king of Macedonia, invited him when he came to Athens, and went to his lectures: it seems that he also invited him to the court, without managing to attract him there.

The Athenians held him in great respect: they handed him the keys to the city, and honored him with a golden crown and a bronze statue. He not only taught wisdom, but practiced it: he became a proverb for his temperance. He wrote several books, among which was a famous Politics, written when he was still under the influence of the Cynics (who taught a kind of anarchic communism in politics), but most of Zeno's books, of which only a few fragments remain, must have contained the foundations of the doctrine.

Chrysippus [6]was called the second founder of the Portico, and in a verse that became proverbial: if there were no Chrysippus there would be no Stoa.

These are the patriarchs, the founders of the Stoic school, which however continues and flourishes also in the following centuries,

[6] Chrysippus of Soli (281 BC – Athens, c. 208 BC) was an ancient Greek philosopher and mathematician.

and if we look at the external history of Stoicism, we can distinguish three phases or eras of this history:

1st Ancient Stoicism;

2nd Middle Stoicism, of an eclectic and popular nature, represented by Panaetius of Podi who lived in the second century;

3° The most recent Stoicism, of the imperial era, represented by Seneca, Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius.

The works of the latter, the more recent Stoics, have survived; the older works have all been lost except for a few fragments.

Object of

Philosophy

The Stoics, like the Epicureans, give philosophy a practical purpose: it is the education of the mind and soul in virtue. Knowledge is not valuable in itself, but rather insofar as it leads to a virtuous life, which is the only happy life. Except that this purpose cannot be achieved except through science: true morality presupposes true knowledge.

With this position the Stoics thus distinguish themselves from those who esteem knowledge for knowledge's sake and place the perfection or highest form of human activity in the contemplative life.

On the contrary, the Cynics despise science and make philosophy consist solely in strength of mind and the practical exercise of virtue.

According to the Stoics, virtue, in its most general sense, includes: rectitude of thought that aims at truth and knows how to guard against error; exact knowledge of what is, of the nature of things; and practical and moral rectitude.

We thus have a trilogy: logic, physics, and ethics. Hence the three parts of philosophy: logic or dialectics, physics, and ethics, which had already begun to be distinguished in the academic school.

The most important part, of course, remains Ethics; but the earliest Stoics, conceiving the parts of philosophy as a whole, opened the way to theoretical research, which they cultivated with no less diligence than the Peripatetics. To demonstrate this connection, they use several comparisons: they liken philosophy to an egg, of which logic would be the shell, ethics the white, and physics the innermost part; or to an animal, of which logic would be the bones and tendons, ethics the fleshy parts, and physics the soul; or to a fertile field, which is perhaps the most successful comparison: logic would be the hedge that protects it, ethics the fruits, and physics the earth and trees.

The meaning of all these comparisons is what we have said: rectitude of thought that protects the wise man from errors, knowledge of nature as the basis and root of virtue, and finally the moral life which is the fruit and perfection of all wisdom, indeed wisdom itself in its most concrete meaning.

The Logic.

The Stoics were probably the first to use this word to designate the science of thought. However, they understood it in a very broad sense. Logic is the science of the Logos, which is both thought and speech. They also included grammar and rhetoric (grammar as part of dialectics, rhetoric as the art of continuous discourse).

The important part of the Stoic Logic concerns the theory of knowledge, and more specifically the question of the criterion of truth. Human knowledge begins with sensation. Originally, the Stoics say, when man is born, the soul is like a tabula rasa, and the first characters imprinted upon it are those that come from sensations. Thus, the representation of objects arises in us, which is an affection produced in us by the object, by the representable object.

This imprint of objects on the spirit causes a modification of the soul and, comparing the capacity of this to be modified (even by several objects at the same time), to that of the air when many together speak and shout.

From these first impressions are formed the images that constitute memory, and from the multitude of similar images, experience, as Aristotle had already taught.

From perceptions and images we form general ideas, concepts, some of which form naturally and spontaneously.

For the Stoics, the criterion for evaluating the objective validity of our knowledge is important, starting precisely with sensible knowledge which is the starting point and the basis of all other knowledge.

The Stoics know that some of our representations are true, others false: and some can be said to be true in one sense and false in another (as when Orestes sees his sister Electra and believes her to be a fury): the question therefore is whether there is a criterion for distinguishing true representations from false images or phantoms.

The Skeptics denied that this criterion existed; the Stoics admitted it and placed it in the so-called cataleptic representation: a sensible representation that posits and recognizes as evident the object from which it originates, thus guaranteeing its full conformity with the object itself.

Such a representation is impressed and sealed in us by an object, and is so determined that it reproduces all the particular properties of the object, and is such that no other object could produce it.

Naturally, one must know how to observe, avoid, or eliminate possible causes of error, look at the thing from multiple angles, change the distance, and so on.

When a representation is like this, it imposes itself on us and provokes our assent and we believe that through it we apprehend something real.

It may be that we give assent even to things that are not true, because assent is an act of our will, but in the case of the Stoic representation, assent is not arbitrary: the representation has such characteristics that it forces us to assent, almost pulling us by the hair. The result is knowledge, learning, understanding, the taking possession of objects, of reality.

The criterion of truth (or of the objective reality of our representations) lies, according to the Stoics, in the intuitive evidence that provokes assent in us and makes us believe in the reality of that object.

Furthermore, the Stoics, like the Epicureans before them, were on the path to recognizing that the criterion of reality does not lie in the single representation, but in the coherence of all the data of experience.

The Stoics attempted to simplify the table of categories by subordinating them to one another. They called them the most general concepts, and distinguished four:

- the substrate or substance,
- the characteristic quality or attribute of a thing,
- the determined modification
- the modification relative to something else.

For example: the man, the wise man, the wise man who is healthy or sick, finally who is a relative or friend of another.

In the hierarchy of concepts, there is a lowest term, the individual, and a highest genus, being, above which there is no more general concept. Later, the Stoics thought it better to call this highest genus something, to include incorporeal things as well. They consider incorporeal things to include emptiness, time, space, and the mental meaning of the words we pronounce—what the word signifies insofar as we understand it.

When we think and speak, we must distinguish three things:

- the word as voice,
- the real thing we express,
- what the word means as we understand its meaning.

For example, the one Seneca quotes: Cato walking (Cato walking), this is a reality outside of thought; when I say: Cato walking, this is an immaterial duplicate of reality.

The Principles of Physics

The Physics of the Stoics included not only the science of nature properly speaking, and of man as part of nature (cosmology and anthropology), but also Theology and in general what we would call Metaphysics, the science of the first principles and the ultimate reasons of the universe: it is therefore the science of reality in its totality, an integral part of philosophy as the theoretical foundation of moral life.

The Stoics begin from the principle, already formulated by Plato, that what is real is what can act or be affected: from which they conclude, like the Epicureans, that all realities are bodies. They admit that there are two principles of all things: an active principle and a passive principle. The passive principle is matter or substance, conceived as stripped of all form and quality, inert, and motionless by itself; the active or dynamic principle is a force always in action, informing matter, giving it quality, moving it, and organizing it.

One cannot exist without the other. The Stoics call this force reason, or even God, a divine force. However, this cosmic reason, or divine force, or active principle of the world, is itself corporeal in nature: it is not an immaterial or spiritual force.

The Stoics, faithful to their dogma that all reality is body, needed to conceive of a corporeal substance so subtle and ethereal, and so

to speak, spiritualized, that it acts like a spirit. And of all things that exist, the most mobile, the most active, the one that penetrates and invests everything, is fire, which Heraclitus already posited as the first principle and substance or symbol of the substance of the world. Fire is everywhere. Heat is the principle and condition of all life. And then the springs of hot water, the volcanoes, the stars that shine in the firmament, the sparks that spring from beaten stone, tell us that fire hides in every matter, penetrates everywhere.

Of course, this cosmic fire should not be confused with our crude flame, which destroys and consumes. No, it is a life-giving fire that penetrates and mixes with universal matter, pervading it all, circulating throughout the world like honey in the cells of a beehive.

It is a fiery spirit, a warm breath, and is also called a creative or artistic fire, which proceeds in an orderly and methodical manner to generate things. And they also call it ether, which is fire itself in its purest and most subtle form. And this divine essence dominates and vivifies universal matter, mixing with it in a kind of sui generis blend, whereby the substances are intimately united without merging, entering whole into one another while each retains its distinctive properties, much like burning iron, when struck on the anvil, and the fire penetrates it entirely; or better still, like the organized body and the soul that pervades it and vivifies it in all its parts.

Cosmic fire is the animating spirit of the world. And they add another name: they also call it seminal reason: it is like a developing germ, and contains within itself the seeds of all particular beings, so that by developing it gives rise to that ordered variety, that harmonious construction that constitutes the world.

These seminal reasons recall the Platonic ideas and the forms that Aristotle spoke of, not separate from reality but immanent in it: they are the generative and formative forces of things, all unified or dependent on the single force that is the animating spirit of the world: it is a conception that is both rational and organic, in that cosmic reason and the world itself are conceived as the development of a living being.

And just as in a living being all the parts are animated and the soul is present everywhere, and the organism is like a delicate instrument whose single string, when touched, makes all the others vibrate; so God, or cosmic reason, is everywhere; it is the world itself in its rational character and in its infection; it is an immanent God who identifies himself with the world; and the whole world is like an immense, immortal living being, of which all the parts conspire together and correspond to one another.

From their point of view, the Stoics also attempt a cosmogony, which does not differ greatly from that imagined by the pre-Socratics, especially by Heraclitus.

The world was born when, from the primitive fire, the universal substance was transformed first into air and then into water; the coarsest part of this condensed into earth, and the finer part vaporized, and this, increasingly fine, became fire, that ethereal fire which, moving in circles, gave rise to the celestial spheres and the stars.

Thus, we must distinguish principles from elements. Principles are eternal, while elements (fire, air, water, and earth) are transformations of the primordial fire, and can also perish, except, of course, fire from which everything derives.

From the different mixtures of elements, combined in different proportions, particular things are born; and their relative position determines the shape of the world: the earth with its seas at the center, then the sphere of air, then the celestial spheres.

The universe has a spherical shape and is finite, it is a continuous whole, but it is surrounded by infinite emptiness, and finite as it is, it has a round shape: this is the origin and meaning of that round and fickle God that we find in Cicero, and that the Epicureans mocked: the spherical shape is, as Plato had already taught, the most perfect and the most suited to circular motion.

And just as the world was formed from the primitive fire or divine substance, so it returns to it. When the revolutions of the world and the stars have completed their course, and after a certain

number of years the planets find themselves all together occupying the respective points from which they originally started, and all possible events have occurred; thus, the current cycle of events having been exhausted, the great year, as they called it, is completed (let's say that it is, according to certain calculations, 12,945 years), then the differentiated matter and all particular existences are reabsorbed into the primitive substance: the world is consumed in a universal conflagration.

The global process ends in catastrophe, with the return of all things to their divine source. Our existence and our current world are like an episode in this divine life.

An episode, however, that repeats itself periodically, because the universal conflagration is not an annihilation but a return of things to their original state: the divine substance remains, containing the seed of new rebirths, of a renewal or palingenesis of the world: a new cycle of existences begins, a new process that unfolds identically to the first; the same celestial spheres that complete their revolutions and the same earth inhabited by the same men.

Religion

Thus will Socrates and Plato and their friends return: it was a Pythagorean idea of the eternal recurrence of the same things.

What is important in the Stoic doctrine is the concept of an internal law that determines all the details of the world process: nothing happens without a preceding cause, and the order and series of causes is perfectly determined: the rigorous connection of causes and effects constitutes an inviolable necessity: which, however, is not a mechanical and blind necessity resulting from the movement and combination of the simple parts of matter, but is a necessity founded in reason and an expression of the reason of the world: providence, which works according to ends and orders everything for the best.

The world is a rational order, in which every particular thing has its place and the world is a coherent whole.

It is a conception that is both deterministic and teleological; and when the Stoics' religious interest prevails or they want to approach the popular conception, they end up identifying their metaphysical principle with the will of Zeus.

Thus we have a series of expressions, God, Reason, Nature, Fire the artificer or artist, Seminal Reason, Necessity, Destiny,

Providence, Divine Will, which signify the same principle either in itself or in its various relations with the multiple particular existences that make up the universe.

For this reason, their physics is both cosmology and theology. The natural force that produces and manifests itself in the world is divine reason, God himself. When this animated whole is conceived in its unity, it can be called either God or the world: this is the so-called pantheism of the Stoics.

A point that deserves to be highlighted is that reason in human beings cannot be explained unless we admit that it has roots in universal reality and that there is a cosmic reason.

The Stoics, in opposition to the Epicureans and contemporary skeptical schools, were defenders of the concept of divine providence and religious faith. Hence their attitude toward popular beliefs and the gods of polytheism. Naturally, they rejected the anthropomorphisms and mythical fables recounted by the poets, but saw in the popular gods partial and diverse expressions of the single, universal divinity they professed.

They seek a physical reason for traditional fables: therefore, an allegorical interpretation of myths, according to the different elements in which the Gods act or the efficacy they exert: sometimes also resorting to etymological interpretations.

Zeus, which comes from living, represents universal life; and the divinity is called Juno the air, Poseidon the sea, Demeter the earth, Hephaistos (Hephaestus) the fire.

In the same spirit, they considered and treated divination or prophecy, founded for them on the rational connection of all things and phenomena, which makes the world a whole in agreement with itself, on what was called the sympathy of nature, by which an event can be an indication or sign of another future. This, of course, does not protect them from superstition and the criticism of less credulous adversaries.

Finally, another consequence of the Stoics' pantheism and their teleological conception is their optimism, their obligation to demonstrate the perfection of the world, after having used this perfection and its beauty to demonstrate the existence of divinity. Naturally, they faced objections and difficulties: the existence of evil and pain. Hence their Theodicy, the justification of providence.

Their general answer is that providence concerns the whole, not the single parts and not the individuals as such, but only insofar as they are part of the whole and contribute to its harmony and perfection: in the same way that in a beautiful comedy there may be details that are not beautiful, but which nevertheless give a certain grace to the entire composition.

More specifically, they consider evil (or what appears to be such) not in isolation, but in relation to the whole. It can be considered either as an inevitable consequence of conditions created for good or as a means itself to achieve good: good is born from evil or is a means to good. This is the belief of the Stoics, as of all optimists.

Moral evil is more difficult to explain, and here they help themselves as best they can, for example, by saying that good and evil are rationally connected and one cannot be conceived without the other. The Stoics expended all their acumen to reconcile the reality and necessity of things with their rational faith. The fundamental idea of their Physics is that nature, the universe, is a nature full of reason and divine: it is an entire ordering of ends in its perfection.

The goal of man, part of this whole, is to rise to the contemplation and imitation of this perfect world: to realize within himself the reason that is the reason of all things. This is why Physics is the metaphysical foundation of Stoic Ethics.

They distinguish natural beings into four classes: inorganic beings, plants, animals and men.

The soul

The Stoics conceive of the soul as a warm and tense spirit (effluvium), which has its seat in the heart, feeds on the vapors of the blood, and sends its air currents throughout the organism, spreading and penetrating every part of it. It is itself a body and is mixed with the body, with that mixture that overcomes the impenetrability of bodies, so that two substances can penetrate each other without losing their distinctive properties: in the same way as fire or divine spirit circulates in the world, holding it together and enlivening it with its varying degrees of tension.

That the soul is corporeal in nature was something they had to admit, first of all, by the general principle of their ontology that all reality is a body, and then more specifically by considering the life of the soul in relation to the body. The soul suffers with the body when the latter is ill, wounded, or cut.

Then there are the bodily changes produced by emotions (shame, fear). Chrysippus adds another consideration: death is the separation of the soul from the body; the soul could not be joined and then separated from the body if it were not itself corporeal. Finally, there is another experiential fact: the transmission of the quality of the soul from parents to children: just as appearance or illnesses are inherited, so are intellectual or moral qualities.

According to the Stoics, the soul is born with the body: in generation, a part of the parents' soul is transmitted to the embryo: until the embryo is formed, it has only a vegetative function: after birth, under the action of external air, through a kind of condensation and cooling, the animal soul develops , which in humans is the rational soul. This does not mean that reason enters man from the outside, into an organism that was not previously equipped with it: no, the idea of the Stoics is that the vital spirit that is transmitted from parents to children is already in itself a substance endowed with reason, such that a rational being can derive from it, except that reason is still latent in the embryo, the vital spirit acts only as a vegetative nature, and only on contact with the air is it transformed into an animal soul, and this, developing, becomes a rational soul in man: which does not happen immediately, but still requires time, because they teach that the soul is originally a blank slate and needs the first fourteen years of life to develop all its powers: the newly born child is not yet in fact a rational being, he is only potentially so: only through sensations, representations and with the exercise of his activity does he become what he must be, a being endowed with reason, which therefore, if it was latent in the embryo and imperfect in the child, cannot be said to be something of extrinsic to man, the soul which is added from outside to his original nature, but was already implicitly inherent in that seminal substance from which he was born.

Although spread throughout the body, the soul has a central seat in the chest, or more precisely in the heart (someone must have also thought of the brain), from where the air currents that regulate the various functions originate.

Hence the different parts of the soul, as they call them, which are these eight: the five senses, language, the generative capacity, and, above all, the governing principle from which all those other parts or functions branch off and extend to their proper organs like the tentacles of an octopus.

This multiplicity of functions does not alter the unity of the soul. The guiding force is, as it were, the source of all other faculties. It is reason that perceives through the senses, gives its assent to representations, forms concepts, and transforms impulses or instincts into conscious actions. It is through this central force that we say "I" and feel ourselves to be persons.

The Stoics insist on this unity of the person, which for them is constituted by reason. They, at least the earliest ones, admit neither the tripartite division of the soul found in Plato nor the dualism (Platonic and Aristotelian) between the irrational and rational parts of the soul. For them, the human soul is essentially rational, so that man not only participates in the divine life like all other natural beings, but, endowed as he is with reason, has a greater affinity, a more intimate kinship with the divine essence. And this divine

character of man is all the stronger the more man allows reason to dominate and realize itself.

Hence that idea about immortality that we find attributed to Chrysippus: virtuous souls last longer than others, after separation from the body: according to Cleanthes all souls, but according to Chrysippus only those of the wise, last until the final combustion, in which, like all other beings, they will be absorbed into the divine substance, which alone remains immortal and eternal.

Meanwhile, we know that this divine life of the world and the entire course of events is governed by a law that admits of no exceptions: the law of destiny, of the necessary concatenation of causes and effects. Not even man and his actions can escape this law: they are part of that chain of events. On the other hand, however, the Stoics have a keen sense of human activity, personality, and responsibility, and must somehow acknowledge the freedom of the will.

According to Chrysippus, we must also consider man's voluntary actions which presuppose the affirmation of the agent's own will, his personal and direct participation.

The motion of a cylinder on an inclined plane is explained by the original impulse and the inclination of the plane on which the body moves: but this is not enough: the manner and continuation of the motion also depend on the nature of the cylinder.

Chrysippus' conclusion is that the wicked are wrong to resort to fate as a safe refuge, attributing to it the blame for their bad actions, instead of considering them as the effects of their own recklessness.

Ultimately, for the Stoics, man's freedom consists in the affirmation of his rational nature, recognizing the divine necessity of all that happens and exists, and conforming his own conduct to this necessity, making himself, so to speak, a voluntary and consenting collaborator of divinity in the realization of reason in the world.

The wise man wants what fate wants, meaning by fate not blind destiny, but providence, the rational order of the world.

Stoic Ethics

The end of life

Even for the Stoics, as for all ancient moralists, the moral problem presents itself in this form: what is the ultimate end of life, the highest good, and everyone agrees that this end exists, and it is happiness.

What does happiness consist of? 1 According to Antisthenes, founder of the Cynic school, happiness consists in virtue, which is self-sufficient, is the only true good of man, makes the wise man free from external things and from superfluous needs or appetites which are an artificial result of culture, makes him live according to nature, not according to the conventions and foolish opinions of men: an intuition of an energetic and insolent life which, if it was attractive for the strength of soul and the exclusive love of virtue that it preached, was also repellent for the contempt for the science that it flaunted and the impudence or contempt for propriety of which its followers boasted.

The most popular type of Cynic remained Diogenes of Sinope, with his barrel, his lantern and his frank speech: he was called a slightly mad Socrates.

Thus the Stoics reconnect with the Cynics and assimilate their spirit, tempering and renewing it with a whole metaphysical doctrine of man and the world.

The Stoics start from this principle: that man, like every living being, is born with a tendency or instinct; the fundamental one, which is self-love, the tendency to preserve oneself and one's own state or constitution.

The constitution of a being is its nature, the arrangement and relationship of its component parts. Self-love is for every living being like a recommendation made by nature for that being's preservation.

The Stoics add: it is not true what some say (alluding to the Epicureans) that the first impulse, the fundamental instinct of living beings, is the pursuit of pleasure. Pleasure is like an addition, a result of satisfied natural activity, which has achieved its proper goal: repeating Aristotle's idea, that pleasure is the fulfillment of the act, it is not the primary end of nature, but something that is added to the act as youth is its bloom.

What, then, is the ultimate goal of human activity and therefore the supreme principle of conduct? The Stoics' hallowed formula is that the goal is to live in accordance with nature.

In fact, living according to nature when speaking of man means for the Stoics precisely the same as living according to reason, which

is the essential and guiding part of his constitution, and therefore becomes the regulator and moderator of his impulses.

If man were to abandon himself to an irrational impulse, he would act in a manner unconformable to his nature, he would not preserve his constitution. In a broad sense, this also means living in conformity with the universal constitution of things, with the reason that governs the world: the human individual is not something detached or separated from the whole, but is part of that whole that is the world, subject to the same law.

The Stoics are not content to say: there is among men a common reason that allows them to understand each other and to regulate their lives according to certain norms; but they add: this reason is a cosmic principle, the active principle of the world, nature itself in its intimate essence, and human reason is a particular case, a derivation of this universal reason that governs the world.

From here came the expression "natural law," "law of nature," to mean moral law, which later became so popular.

Virtue and affections

This life according to reason is virtue, the supreme end, the perfection of the rational being. And virtue, thus understood, is not only the most worthy and best, the most beautiful and the most useful, but it is self-sufficient, the perfect good, the only true good there is, the only thing in which happiness consists.

All other things are indifferent, and among these indifferent things are life and death, health and sickness, wealth or poverty, all external goods and honors, the good or bad opinion that others have of us.

The wise man, the virtuous man, carries within himself alone the conditions of his happiness. The worst enemy of reason, that which is incompatible with virtue and disturbs happiness, are affections, passions, and attachment to the false goods of life.

Affects are not a part of the soul, the so-called irrational part opposed to reason, but false judgments, false opinions, value judgments about deceptive goods. The expressions the Stoics use to define affect reveal the uncertainty and difficulty arising from their exclusively intellectualistic interpretation of affective life: affectives are sometimes called judgments or opinions; sometimes violent and excessive impulses.

Affects are disturbances of the soul, weaknesses, illnesses, and the wise man does not allow himself to be overcome by them, but dominates them, fights them, eradicates them from himself, prevents them by refusing his assent to the objects that would provoke them.

This is the apathy of the wise man. And it's not that he's insensitive: he's not denied regulated and reasonable affections.

The wise man, therefore, is a serene and even spirit, untroubled by unreasonable affections. His wife Xanthippe said of Socrates that he always had the same expression when he left home in the morning and when he returned in the evening, and vice versa.

Socrates had already said that virtue is science, based on clear ideas, and can be taught. In defining virtue, the Stoics now emphasize its intellectual aspect, considering prudence, the correct assessment of things and true goods, as the primary virtue. One cannot be courageous without being just, nor temperate without being prudent.

Naturally, what is said of virtue must be said of vice. A man who falls into the water and remains a few inches from the surface drowns no less than one who falls to the bottom of the sea.

All men can be divided into two classes: the mad and the wise, and there is nothing in between: whoever does not obey reason is

mad. The wise man is the ideal of perfection, right reason made human. He is the only one free, rich, happy, equal to the gods.

Preferable and non-preferable things

If the Stoics had remained faithful to their ethical rigor and their paradoxes, they would have had to give up exercising a broad practical effectiveness, they would not have been able to have the following they had.

In fact, when they say that health or illness, wealth or poverty, and all external things are indifferent to the happiness of the wise, they mean that they have no moral value in themselves. But this does not mean that they have no value from the point of view of human desires.

They themselves teach that man is moved by impulses, the fundamental one being self-preservation; and therefore he is led to love and seek things that benefit him and to avoid those that can harm him. They affirm that reason is destined to be the architect who gives form, order, and regulation to impulses. This means that there is a material or substratum of moral life upon which reason is exercised, and which is made up of human desires and the objects to which they are directed.

Thus, the Stoics, approaching and adapting to common sense, were led to a series of attenuations of their doctrine, and first of all to admit a difference in value between the things they had declared morally indifferent. They distinguish indifferent things into three classes: preferable, non-preferable, and then those absolutely indifferent, which have no importance either for the body or the mind.

The first class includes life, health, physical strength, beauty, sufficient wealth, good reputation, and especially spiritual qualities such as skill, intelligence, and a good memory; these are useful things that are not to be despised. The second class includes the opposite qualities: poverty, illness, weakness, dishonor, etc. And then there are things that are truly and absolutely indifferent, such as having an even or odd number of hairs or spending one coin rather than another of equal value.

Once they had entered upon this path, the Stoics, as they distanced themselves from the Cynics, were led to deal with a multitude of practical questions and even to engage in casuistry to reconcile their principles with the demands of life. It is folly, says Chrysippus, to take no account of health or wealth; and he discusses what are the legitimate and appropriate means for the wise man to acquire them. And subtle minds as they are, they make distinctions: the wise man, strictly speaking, lacks nothing, but nevertheless many things are convenient to him, he uses them, he utilizes them. This

distinction between the good in an absolute sense and relative goods or preferable things leads to a second consequence in the evaluation of human actions and therefore of duties.

From the strict point of view of ethics there should be only two kinds of actions: virtuous and vicious, but there is also natural life, with its instincts, needs and interests directed towards those things which, without being goods, are preferable things.

Thus, between virtues and vices, there are intermediate actions that the Stoics call expedient. In this way, the Stoics also mitigate the aspect of moral duty by bringing it into the realm of expediency.

A third concession the Stoics are forced to make to common sense is to admit improvement, the possibility of progressing in virtue, thus admitting a third intermediate class between the wise and the foolish: that of men who progress in virtue. Thus, with these attenuations and mitigations, the Stoics return to the great educational tradition that stems from Socrates, always maintaining their faith in the absolute value of moral good and the ideal they personify in their sage.

These concessions to common sense are not to be understood in a chronological sense: they are already found in Zeno and the early Stoics, and are concessions born from the need to adapt the moral doctrine of the Cynics to the needs of human conscience and life.

Stoic Ethics

Stoic ethics presents a double tendency or character: on the one hand, an individualistic tendency in that it proclaims that the wise man is self-sufficient, independent of all external goods, unshakable in the consciousness of his virtue and happiness; and on the other hand, a social and universalistic character in that it teaches the subordination of the individual to reason, which is the universal law of the world, from which arises the natural society that exists among all beings participating in reason.

The first tendency, which links Stoicism to its Cynic origins, is seen in the specific precepts regarding individual morality and, above all, in their attempted justification for suicide. They say that the wise man can reasonably renounce his life either for the benefit of his country and friends, or in the case of excessive suffering, bodily injury, or incurable disease. Another source specifies five reasons or occasions for taking one's life: rendering eminent service, when forced into a shameful action, poverty, illness, and the progressive weakening of the spirit. Suicide is, in certain cases, for the wise man the supreme affirmation of his moral freedom and virtue, when circumstances beyond his control make it impossible or difficult for him to live in accordance with his ideal.

He does not take his own life because he fears pain or in general for hedonistic reasons, but because life (which in itself belongs to the class of indifferent things) no longer offers him the conditions that make it desirable and usable for good.

The Stoic considers the external circumstances that invite him to kill himself with a supreme act that makes him superior to external circumstances.

The individualistic tendency of Stoic ethics is counterbalanced and tempered by the social tendency. Here, Stoicism reveals its broad aspects. Man is not a singular individual, isolated and independent from others, but part of an ordered whole. The more he obeys reason, the freer he is, and reason does not isolate him, but unites him with other rational beings, subject to the same law. And reason teaches each individual to subordinate his goals and conduct to the goals and good of the whole.

The Stoics had the liveliest sense of human solidarity and just as there is a common and universal reason, so there is a common law that must regulate human relationships.

They say that what is right is by nature, not by convention.

The idea of natural law, or rational law, which dominated European thought for so many centuries, was developed by the Stoics. Law is founded on reason: the sharing of reason, this kind of rational kinship between men, is the foundation of justice and social

community. Natural law emanates from divine reason, from cosmic reason; it is this same reason that takes the form of command.

We have no duties or legal relationships with animals, but we do with humans, with all humans. The Stoics do not propose the abolition of slavery, but they sense its iniquity, proclaiming with rationality the dignity of the person and the equality of all men.

They look not so much at the actual inequalities that exist among men, but at the use each makes of his faculties in whatever condition he finds himself, and they know that a slave can be free, as Epictetus was, while many free men are in reality slaves. And after or together with justice, benevolence. Nature and reason desire that man be a friend to man and desire to be loved by him. These are the two truly cardinal virtues of social life: justice and charity.

The Stoics say excellent things about particular societies, about the friendship that they admit and celebrate especially among the wise, about the family that they want pure and founded on affection, and also about the State, which the wise man can concern himself with when he can do good and there is no reasonable impediment that distracts him from political life.

The society they speak of is the universal society of all rational beings, for which there are no frontiers or distinctions between Greeks and barbarians, or historical or national differences. This is the so-called Stoic cosmopolitanism.

And the Gods are also part of this society in its broadest sense. The world is called the city of men and Gods.

Stoic virtue is accomplished and has its foundation in piety, homage to the supreme reason that governs the world, resignation to its wise decrees, conformity and obedience to its law, with purity of heart and will.

A document of this religious character of the Stoic doctrine is Cleanthes' Hymn to Jupiter, notable for a certain solemn gravity and the warmth of conviction that animates it.

The poet, who is more of a philosopher than a poet, addresses the God of traditional mythology, but conceives him according to Stoic concepts, and through the Homeric epithets the technical terms of the Homeric school sometimes reappear.

The Hymn to Jupiter is a Stoic prayer celebrating Jupiter as the ordering principle of the cosmos. The hymn extols divine rationality, which manifests itself in every aspect of the universe, both in beautiful things and in seemingly negative ones. Cleanthes invites humanity to recognize and follow this universal law, which leads to happiness and harmony.

Zeus, noblest of the immortals, many-named, eternally omnipotent, lord of nature, who rules all beings by law, hail! All mortals have a right to appeal to you.

To you we turn, having been granted an image of sound, we, the only ones among all beings who drag out their mortal life on earth.

To you I dedicate my song and I will always raise hymns to your power.

The entire cosmos obeys you as it dances around the earth;

the forked lightning, of flame, ever living.

Thanks to his blow all natural phenomena occur.

With it you harmonize the common Logos that wanders everywhere, permeating both the great and the small stars;

from where you derive supreme royalty over everything.

Without you, O divine one, no work is produced on earth.

neither in the ethereal divine sky nor in the sea, except the plans that the wicked devise in their madness.

But you know how to bring excesses back to the right measure, disorder to order and with wisdom you make hostile things friendly.

Thus, you have brought all things back to one, both good and evil, a single eternal Logos affirming for every aspect of reality.

Some mortals, however, out of malice shun this Logos.

Oh wretched men! While continuing to desire the goods of life, they pay no attention to the universal law of God, nor do they listen to those who could bring peace to their lives according to reason, if only they would listen to him.

Behold, then, they foolishly wander from evil to evil, some becoming entangled in anguishing controversies for the sake of fame; others fretting over money, still others abandoning themselves without restraint to the pleasures and seductions of the body.

Be that as it may, they end up falling into evils, which drag themselves from one to another, cultivating desires that are the very opposite of what they really want.

But you, Zeus, who bestow all gifts and gather the clouds, free men from ruinous ignorance with your bright lightning; then, father, banish it from our souls and grant that at last we may meet the wisdom on which you yourself rely to rule all things according to justice.

Thus, honored by your providential intervention, we honor you, ceaselessly celebrating your works, as is right for one who knows himself to be mortal. For there is no greater merit, either for men or for gods, than to sing hymns, according to justice, to the universal law.

Statua di Zeus in trono
Fine II-inizi III sec.d.C.
Dal VII km. della via Appia Nuova
cd. "santuario orientale", 1929

God is

conceived by Cleanthes as the divine fire that penetrates the whole world, as the cosmic law that governs all things with justice, as the Providence without which nothing happens either in heaven or on earth or in the sea, and this conception is not hindered by the existence of evil, because evil is due to ignorance.

God is conceived as an essentially moral principle, he is the supreme reason and the good, and from him one invokes liberation from ignorance and evil, and with him the poet ends as he began by praising, and expressing with a certain religious emotion, the fundamental ideas of the physics and the theology of the Stoics.

This religious character of their conception, their austere morality, the restless search for interior perfection, the condemnation of affections so in contrast with the beautiful serenity and that sense of harmony and measure which is characteristic of the classical spirit, have led more than one to believe in an oriental and more particularly Semitic origin of Stoicism: all the more so when one considers the Asiatic origin of the founders of the school and of many of the later Stoics.

The changing conditions of culture, the prevalence of moral and religious problems in the face of invasive corruption, political decadence and the dissolution of ancient faiths, and then the personal character of the founders are enough to explain the specific characteristics of Stoicism: a doctrine that was formed and

developed on Greek soil and with elements drawn from the preceding philosophical tradition.

The same moral and religious inspiration, the idea that man's true and only happiness consists in virtue, and that virtue consists in obeying reason, and together with this the universal character of moral norms and faith in Providence, to which the virtuous man entrusts himself with a sure conscience, are all things that are already found in Socrates: the Stoics, through the Cynics, are connected to this Socratic tradition, seeking together a scientific foundation, a metaphysical basis for moral life.

In opposition to Platonic and Aristotelian dualism they find it in the monistic conceptions of the pre-Socratics, especially Heraclitus, not without accepting more or less modified some fundamental ideas of the speculation of Plato and Aristotle, the distinction between matter and form, or between the passive and active principle of the world, and above all their rationalism and teleological conception.

Thus was born their construction, a moral idealism based on a dynamic or teleological pantheism. Because of their dogmatic nature, they were attacked by other schools, especially the Skeptics, and their ethical paradoxes were often derided. But all this did not impede the great influence they exerted.

Faced with the atomism taught by the Epicureans, they will assert the idea that the world is not made up of fragments, but is a whole ordered and regulated by reason, and their doctrine of cosmic reason is destined for a great future.

Their morality will be a school of incomparable energy in ancient and modern times, and stoic elements will always resurface whenever the formulas of the philosophers seem lax and inadequate to the seriousness and austerity of moral life.

If we look at Stoicism itself, at its origins, what is characteristic of it is the identification it places between nature and reason, between happiness and virtue.

The Stoics promise man happiness provided he seeks it in virtue and conceive of virtue as living according to nature or reason, because nature itself is reason.

Hence the difficulties that beset the system. The Stoic ideal of the sage has an artificial character not because it is too perfect (a moral ideal can never be perfect enough) but because it is conceived outside the conditions of life.

Man is not only reason, but also feeling and passion, and the Stoics would like to eliminate this entire irrational part of the soul and reduce it to reason. One might ask: can this ideal ever become a reality? If we admit, with the Stoics themselves, that this ideal never existed, it can never become reality; the entire system founded on

the concept of the rational nature of the world and on the providential purpose that leads to virtue and happiness is compromised.

Because in reality virtue and happiness are two different things, and their identity or being one the consequence of the other is at most an aspiration, a need, something that is not but which it would be good if it were.

The Stoics believe they are providing a metaphysical foundation to moral life by realizing their ideal, dogmatically affirming the identity of nature with reason; they must then not only make concessions to the natural demands of life, but conceive of virtue itself as the effort, the energy, to achieve the good, and make happiness consist in this effort. And in this they are approaching the truth. For in reality, the divine in man is not what he is, but the tendency and effort to bring about the good.

If nature and reason were the same, there would be no need for so much bloodshed and ruin to achieve a little good in this world. Or at least, if we wish to say with Cleanthes that nothing happens in the world without the will of Providence, we must add that it needs our cooperation and humbly offer it, like a holocaust, even our suffering and our sacrifice so that Good may be, so that its will may be done.

The early Christians, seeking to attract the dominant and culturally most gifted social classes, equipped themselves with a highly respectable cultural and philosophical background, drawing selectively from the schools of the period, particularly the most widespread ones such as Stoicism. Equally important, mastering philosophical tools was essential to counter heretical deviations from the official creed.

In any case, the instrumental use of philosophy gave Christianity the possibility of convergence on three basic points of propaganda:

- criticism of mythology;
- the doctrine of providence;
- the centrality of ethics.

A crucial problem to be solved was, and still is, the reason for the existence of evil. The problem of the existence of evil and its incompatibility with God was attributed to Epicurus:

Either divinity wants to abolish evil but cannot; or it can but does not want to; or it neither wants to nor can; or instead it wants to and can.

If he wants to and cannot, he is impotent, which is not permissible in God;

if he can and does not want to he is malevolent, which is equally alien to God;

if he does not want to and cannot, he is both impotent and malevolent;

But if he wants and can—the only option consonant with divinity—where then do evils come from? Or rather, why doesn't he eliminate them?

On this subject, both the rabbinical and Christian schools opt for a simple solution, that of affirming the omnipotence and universal foreknowledge of God as well as the autonomous capacity of man for action.

He who has power over the universe, in his extraordinary esteem for man, has allowed something to also be in our power, namely, choice, which is not servile but autonomous, founded on the freedom of reason.

This is a statement of principles that does not explain how the world can function with two autonomous powers: unless we resort to modern physics and the heroic action of a famous cat.